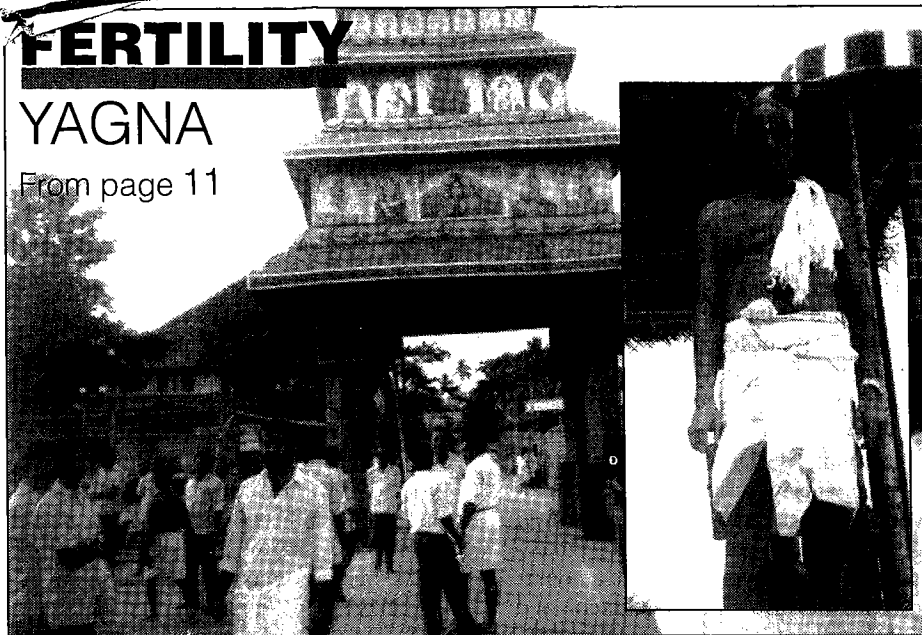


FERTILITY YAGNA

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Yagna entrance arch, inset: chief priest C.V. Akkirthipad. Right: V. Ramakrishnan Nair.

hotels, the remainder are accommodated at CARD facilities.

With the sun breaking through cloud cover, European television crews are training their cameras on the wide brick and stone-pillared yagna platform that is the psychic focus of the ceremony. The couples spread out in front of the temple-like platform. Many are religiously dressed in unembroidered saris and white kurthas, an evocative scene. The press is not allowed to photograph them or talk to them in the yagna hall. The first homa fire is about to be lit. Hunched over the main homa pit is a team of *Nambudri* brahmin priests talking in rapid fire Malayalam and gesturing while others bring in tightly-rolled bundles of dried banana leaves. As Nair explains that these leaves are gathered after a storm blows them from the tree, the priests collecting only those that face in certain directions from the stem. The bundles are rubbed vigorously together to ignite the fire. After 40 minutes of taut-muscled effort and Veda-

chanting, sparks jet out into flame, and it is transferred to the main homa—"an auspicious beginning," notes Nair. Tons of wood, ghee and rice have been brought in, all through a government co-op so there is no shadow of financial misappropriation. Sixty brahmins officiate—nine at a time on the yagna platform. It is all conducted by 78-year-old C. Vasudevan Akkirthipad, a lean scarecrow of a man with an encyclopedic knowledge of Vedic liturgy. Nair introduces the priest to HINDUISM TODAY, saying Akkirthipad is highly regarded by Dr. Stahl, a German Vedic researcher. In 1975 Stahl commissioned Akkirthipad to orchestrate a mammoth yagna for cosmic peace.

Still this yagna is a kind of alchemical ad hoc affair. There are no single-scripture directions for its performance. The ritual is reconstructed as a best guess from the *Rig Veda*, *Yajur Veda*, *Prasna Marg* and *Ramayana*. Nair says if the yagna is successful, CARD will produce a text of the rite. The ad

hoc air of the yagna was the only thing reportedly criticized by Vedic hierophants. But those criticisms appeared as references in antagonistic newspaper editor columns. When HINDUISM TODAY checked around with Vedic scholars, all were enthusiastic about the yagna and felt it signaled a fresh breath of spiritual air in an overly-rationalistic India.

To Nair, who was educated as a botanist, this is an experiment. He says, "My idea is purely research-oriented, and I have an open mind to the result." However, he is very confident of the outcome because of the fidelity to the *Rig Veda*. As the science behind the ritual, Nair explains that "the impurities of the human body and the sins obsessing the *indriyas* (5 senses, 5 organs of action—including genitals—and thought) cause disease and failure to beget children." The homa and hymns purify the *indriyas* and the atmosphere the couples are in for seven days. Nair explains the combined electromagnetic properties of the mud pots and water directly alter the *indriya* states. The final Vedic data will be in when the couples conceive. ■



NAIR'S GNOSIS

HINDUISM TODAY: Does this yagna belittle women as some women's groups assert?

V.S.R. NAIR: No. These groups actually feign ignorance of women's key role in such yagnas. No Vedic ritual has ever belittled women, let alone the Puthrakameshti Yagna.

HT: Does the yagna project women as the responsible party for infertility?

VSRR: No. Hindu Vedic dharma describes both husband and wife as an integrated one. If a woman could not conceive, it may be due to the karma of both and not one individual in any case. Childlessness was never ascribed to the sins of one of the couple. However, karma yoga is one area about which ordinary people cannot say anything categorically. The women's groups don't want women to bear children at all.

HT: What is the criteria for the selection process?

VSRR: We eliminated those who have second wives, who want only a male child, who have chronic infections and uterine or testicular dysfunction or have had the uterine removed. We insisted on general good health. The couples include doctors, engineers, government officers.

HT: Critics charge you are contributing to overpopulation with this yagna.

VSRR: Our aim is not to overpopulate India, nor do we egoistically like the idea of thousands of couples appealing to us to do something at a spiritual level for them. Most of the couples have already tested the allopathic and surgical methods available in modern medicine for conception, but in vain. They also expressed faith in God and religion and have visited scores of temples across India to beget children by the grace of God. It was at this time we were also contemplating to do an experiment with Vedic rituals. This yagna promises apparent results in a reasonable time such as three months to nine months. Other yagnas may not offer such an apparent and visible effect as a direct inference arising out of the yagna.

HT: Is there a charge for the couples in the yagna?

VSRR: We have not charged any couple or patient for participation. However, we have collected Rs2,000 from each couple toward their boarding fee and the expense part of the yagna: ghee, fire wood, etc.

HT: Are there any cases, besides scriptural, of this yagna?

VSRR: Here in Kerala our state poet laureate, Mahakavi Akkitham, told me he was born to his father as a result of performing a miniature *Puthrakameshti* called *ganahoma*.

HT: What is the next step in your assessment of the yagna?

VSRR: If we are successful, we will do this kind of yagna everywhere as it is cheaper for each couple than the medical expenses they incur for conception through advanced science facilities—if we fail, we acknowledge it and close the chapter once and for all.